Kunapipi

Volume 12 | Issue 3 Article 3

1990

Hospitalizing

Marion Halligan

Hospitalizing

Abstract

Veronica Ballod sits in a train travelling north. She has forgotten that once trains meant connection with glamorous places, so that whenever she saw or heard one her heart yearned to be on it, going there. Not staying here. Or rather, she hasn't forgotten, she remembers it as a fond desultory fact, long past its use-by date. Train travel is a chore, now. Planes are what is glamorous, planes to Europe. The destination, if not the vehicle. The cities of home are known.

Hospitalizing

Veronica Ballod sits in a train travelling north. She has forgotten that once trains meant connection with glamorous places, so that whenever she saw or heard one her heart yearned to be on it, going there. Not staying here. Or rather, she hasn't forgotten, she remembers it as a fond desultory fact, long past its use-by date. Train travel is a chore, now. Planes are what is glamorous, planes to Europe. The destination, if not the vehicle. The cities of home are known.

Then, after Sydney, she recalls it again, in the gut, where memory counts. She looks at the backyards sloping down to the railway line, the grass as green as an Irish bog, lush, mowed, but nothing cultivated, the fences reduced to sheaves of palings, the morning glory vines gobbling everything, the sheds for wood and junk, the clotheslines, sometimes a tree. No gardens: these are backyards, private spaces of earth and air open to the view of every passing train passenger. She is a child again, coming from the coast where the trees hunch dry-leaved against the gales, and this is where exotic begins. Going now the other way. Back.

The house was dark, and very cold. Living in Canberra you forget how cold Newcastle got. Here the wind didn't slice like a knife, it roared in from the sea, blustering, it picked up the frail houses in its teeth and shook them. They groaned, cracks opened, they shuddered with draughts and eddies of air. People said their roofs were filled with sand, tons of it blown in on these winds; that sometimes the ceiling couldn't hold and collapsed with killing weight on the occupants, unless they were lucky enough to be out. Though Veronica knew of no specific examples. She couldn't remember when she'd been on her own in this house before. With the groaning of the timbers and the roaring of the wind she could have been at sea. In a vessel unseaworthy and likely to founder. Like the old tin mission, shaking off its anchorings, setting sail, out past Nobby's, a danger to shipping as well as itself. How far did it get before it sank? Did anybody know?

She prowled around the house. It was late, but she didn't feel like going to bed. She opened cupboards and drawers, not looking for anything, not looking at anything. Simply registering. The button box. The string in the coffee canister. The soup tureen of recipes in the kitchen

cabinet whose glass doors rattled, so when you crept past it too late home you held your breath, tested the floor, but still were not always successful in not setting them off, the glass doors transparent and sliding, more modern than the open-out colour-stained and leaded kind, but they'd've been quieter. Not this sort of early – late – warning system. She jumped up and down in front of it. The noise of the rattling glass was very loud inside the hollow shell of the roaring winter's night outside. She checked the board in the hall, the back-up trap; still the same long-drawn creak. Though father had a number of times crawled under the house to try to fix it. When you stood on it and it sounded and you froze, you understood how ineluctable fate was: when you took your foot off it, it would creak back into place again. However long you waited. Like the second boot.

You would think of the noises that alerted others to your presence, now, when there was nobody to hear, nobody to care.

It was strange to look at other people's objects when they weren't there to temper you gaze. These things that when their mother was at home belonged to her daughters too, but in her absence proclaimed themselves her possessions. And the other things that in the busyness of daily life went un-examined. Over the sideboard was a blown-up photograph. *Ships at Stockton NSW C 1906* said the caption. They were sailing ships, no funnels, with powerful masts and crosspieces and all the careful tracery of ropes, the sky of the picture full of their shapely pencil lines, long diagonals, sometimes cross-hatched into ladders, and horizontal loops and somewhere, though they were not to be seen, would have been the men who knew what they all meant, who could unfurl the sails, lower and raise them, turn them so they caught the breeze or slipped through the gales. Here they were moored several deep to the wharf. Graceful boats, with curving prows and strong bowsprits: George would have known the names, barques perhaps, barquentines, schooners, windjammers, and their cargo: it was coal, wasn't it. Since she was a young woman, when George brought it proudly home and hung it from the picture rail (not at all Alice's idea of a work of art) she'd seen this picture, and never thought to ask. And look, figureheads, curved women white against the black prows, arms crossed, draperies fluttering back, or perhaps it was wings. At the sign of the Flying Angel. Breasting the waves, breasts to the waves: angels and ministers of grace, keeping safe.

They that go down to the sea in ships, said the psalm. *These see the works of the Lord.* What it particularly meant was, the violent ones. The furies of the Lord. In weather like this Nobby's would have flown the flag, Bar Dangerous. Meaning that trying to enter the harbour could wreck your ship. Witness the approaches sown with carcasses. The bones of

fifty ships lie on the oyster bank alone, this shoal of shifting sands where anchors do not hold. Vessels would be lost and all the people in them within sight, at stone's throw people said, of calm water. In one place there are five in a single heap: *Wendouree, Lindus, Colonist, Cawarra, Adolphe,* one on top of the other.

What could you do when the harbour, the port, the safe place was too dangerous to enter? Wait in the roads until the storm abated. Hope not to be cast on the rocks. And even when you were actually in port, it wasn't always much safer. When the winds blew ships thrashed about at the wharves, at those berths three and four deep, damaging themselves and their neighbours, or broke free of their moorings and collided in the congestion, grounded, capsized.

How calm it is in the picture. The frozen moment. Twilight perhaps when the light has clarity but not warmth. Two horses graze. This photograph is a Grecian urn of perfect forever. At this moment, entirely safe. No gales can touch it.

And the men, not to be seen: maybe they are off at the Missions to Seamen just across the wharf – in 1906 still the old tin building – falling in love with the pretty lasses. *Forever wilt thou love and she be fair.* No. Not all of them, anyway. She's never noticed before. There are men in the photographs, not down on the deck where she'd been looking for them, where the finely planked life boats hang, but high up, in the rigging, perched on yard-arms, where the sails are partly furled. Tiny figures. They seem to be looking at the camera. Perhaps they are actually posing, for the photographer standing just where she is. On the grass, with his shuttered telescoping apparatus taking their picture. The horses are blurry round the edges, and there is a figure that looks like a little girl running across the grass, smudging her space, in the time the shutter was closing. Maybe the ropes are so clearly delineated because they too moved as the picture was being taken, occupying more space than the eye could ever perceive.

Veronica remembers Mikelis saying how he loves the solemnness of faces in old photographs. Because the picture took a while to take, not the split second as now. As though that time necessary imparted your real face, not just the fleeting image of it; its substance, its character. As though a bigger chunk of your life had been captured.

Thinking of Mikelis makes her feel lonely in the empty house. She goes into Alice's bedroom, and that's worse. Her mother is so much not there, in this room as it's always been, in the immemorial placing of objects: the pink china basket with a china rose on the side, the pincushion stuck with hat-pins, the cut glass lidded bowl where Alice keeps now little poems she cuts out of the paper, ornaments and trinket boxes, which her daughters once gave her and now find hideous, which

Alice still treasures. It's orderly, no evidence here of the accident, the emergency departure.

She's well, the hospital says, she's resting, as well as can be expected with a broken leg, not a light thing breaking bones at her age, but she's doing well. Veronica thinks of the hospital on its headland, its lighted floors like the decks of an ocean liner, it too breasting the stormy night. She doesn't want to think of her mother slipping over in this lonely house. Lying with doubled up leg a day and a night. Needing the neighbour to notice the paper not brought in. So frail a hold on life and safety: the neighbour noticing the paper. She was wandering a bit, said Josie, the neighbour. She kept talking about the Japanese. Something about them having blocks of wood for pillows. They're lucky, she said, they have blocks of wood for pillows.

Walking through the hospital Veronica had found again the Monet painting of the window at the end of a corridor, the bands of green colours, sand, sea, sky, hazed in the light of its own spray and by the salt-encrusted glass. Just as when she'd come to visit Martin. All the people in all the years who'd passed through this hospital, and still there were windows like Monet paintings. This was a different floor from Martin's; she imagined them ranged one above the other, a series, like haystacks, or water-lilies. This was their winter phase, greenish and subtle; in summer it would be primary blue and yellow, with people, maybe the red sails of windsurfers. Dufy cheerful.

Alice's room looked across the green park where the helicopters landed, to the sea that way. She sat propped up in bed, not close enough to the window to see what happened on the ground with the helicopters, but able to observe brief moments of their rise and fall, when the swift blades of the rotors chopped the silence into chunks that tumbled their noise into the waiting hospital. Just as well. The helicopter meant damage and fear. Saving people, perhaps, but after what disaster.

Alice wonders how she feels. Do you have any pain, the nurses ask. If she says yes they give her some pills. Sometimes she says yes, sometimes no. There is a pain, there is always a pain. She can't grasp it. She isn't sure it should go away. There hadn't been pain on the bathroom floor. That was a black space, and no pillow. Even the Japanese who don't have pillows have blocks of wood to rest on. With a pain you know you are there. It drags at you, holds you in place. You won't float off into black space, out into that dangerous air where the helicopters chop the silence into chunks that tumble down and bruise the ears. Alice has had plenty of pains in her life, but has never got into the habit of taking pills for them.

There are four women in the ward. Near the window on the right is Marie Dare. No one ever visits her. She says in a clear voice: I am bored. I am so bored I am counting my pills to pass the time. She shakes them into her hand and counts them back one by one into the paper cup. She gets to seventeen. In fact there are only nine. To pick them up and swallow them she feels in the palm of her hand. She is almost blind. Miss Dare she is, though most of the nurses call her Marie. Or darling. When they breeze in and take you by the hand. Are you all right, darling? they say. Oh sweetheart, all your bedclothes are on the floor. They bustle and smile and put a shield of friendly energy around the old women. Who flourish briefly, until the nurses swirl off to the next ward.

Near the door on the right is Doreen. She has a startling beauty that the ruin of her old age only makes more poignant. Her hair is silky white ringlets and her eyes summer sea blue. She is a woman out of a drawing room comedy. She needs to make conquests all the time. She tells stories out of play scripts; the other women hear them over and over, see them being polished, see the art with which she offers herself. She adores men. Men are always right. She dotes on her grandson, her granddaughter is okay, some of the time. Her daughter can do nothing right. It's always the wrong nightie, or she's late, or too soon, or hasn't remembered the curlers or the book or the bed-jacket she ought to have known her mother would want. For sons and sons-in-law there's charming petulance and flirtatious demands. She has always been charming and beloved, little girl to old lady. The darling of daddy and uncles and then of lovers, husbands, and now of sons and lovers.

Doreen tells stories, she woos, she croons, she manipulates. Darling, she says to the nurses, sweetheart, the sheets are wrinkled, the light's too bright, my head hurts, I have to have a cup of tea. Her endearments are the velveting of her iron. Alice takes mild malicious pleasure in noticing that she is deserted by syntax and betrayed by grammar. In Alice's family people have always spoken well, even if they weren't much educated. No yous or aints. Marie Dare wishes she'd shut up. She's sick of her wingeing.

In the left hand bed near the window is Betty. She has a visitor who sits on a chair beside the bed. From time to time they have a conversation though they don't look at one another as they speak.

- Did you sit in the chair?
- Yes. I sat in the chair.
- Yes. I used to sit in the chair.
- I sat in the chair for quite a long time.
- You don't want to get cold, sitting in the chair.
- No.

- You've got to watch you don't get a chill.
- I wouldn't want to get a chill.
- Shouldn't sit in the chair too long.

If Doreen is illiterate Noel Coward it is Pinter writing Betty and her friend. He's coached them in the delivery too: slowly, slowly, slow down! Pauses: the strength is in the pauses. Make your audience wait for the next word. It's as if the words are musical notes, and they are gentle jazz musicians, trading slow improvisations.

- They're lovely looking kids. That youngest kiddie.
- Yes. Lovely.
- She's always kept them nice.
- Yes. Lovely. A real credit.
- Lovely things she puts them in.
- Yes. She looks after them. Something lovely.
- Mm. She looks after them. They're a real credit.
- Her mother was good like that.
- Yes. She liked things nice.

The hour is nearly up. Time for one more.

- The Chinaman's wife, she had a stroke.
- Oh.
- Yes. A stroke. On Sunday.
- The Chinaman's wife.
- Yes.
- She had a stroke, did she.
- Yes. On Sunday.

Alice sits in her bed, on the left hand near the door, and watches these performances with the interested eyes of a child. You can see the serious and rather worried small girl she must have been. But she's enjoying the shows, happy to let the spectacle unfold around her. Alice never wanted starring roles, never sought the limelight. But she's about to offer a performance of her own. Out of town daughter paying a visit.

When Veronica came into the ward all the women watched her walk up to her mother and put her arms round her, fearfully, shocked by the frailty of her bones. She sat by the bed and held Alice's hand, bending over, resting her head, pretending to rest her head, on the tiny bony shoulder, so that her mother wouldn't see her eyes filled with tears. The hand was as soft and cool as always; it released a memory of all the years of her mother's touch. And the feel of her cheek as she kissed. Her mother's famous complexion, famous like an Austen

heroine's for its rosy pink and cream colours but fine too, the texture as well as the colour of rose petals, fresh and fragrant soft as they. Wrinkled now, the petals creased and crumpled, but still fine and cool.

Veronica's tears were not entirely for Alice, they were for Veronica's looming loss of Alice. Of course she worried about her mother, the pain, the terrible black space of the day, the night, the day, lying on the bathroom floor, the jostle and prod and pry of death too close and neither of them knowing how to talk about it. She wanted her mother comfortable, happy, unanxious, and she wanted her mother. Alice was sitting up in bed like a small girl who'd lost hers and Veronica wanted to be her child again as well as a competent grown-up person looking after her. She thought there are no grown-up people. No one to make it all right. No mothers any more. We're all children. Except the nurses who do it as a job. In miserly little parcels.

A nurse came in. This is my daughter, said Alice, with pride. The nurse dispensed pills in paper cups. She talked in a very loud voice. Why does she shout, whispered Veronica. She thinks everybody's deaf, said Alice. Nearly everybody is. I'm glad I'm not.

It hadn't ever occurred to Veronica that being able to whisper at your mother was a luxury.

Doreen called out to be introduced and when Veronica was leaving she came over, took her hand, kissed her, all heartfelt goodbye, doing her best to add Veronica to her circle of admirers. Watching her trying to appropriate her daughter Alice thought of all the people she'd have made jealous throughout her life, all the people who'd have watched in impotent rage as she stole their lovers, children, husbands. Suppose that everybody had somewhere a kind of spirit figure, a sort of alter ego voodoo doll that kept the scars and bruises of all the kicks blows scratches stabs that people had thought against them; what a mess Doreen's would be.

You're so lucky, she said to Alice, to have such a *kind* daughter. Her voice wistful, her eyes teary.

In the corridor Veronica met Helen Murphy who'd done radiography training with her. Helen used to be in demand when they had practical inspections because she was thin, it was easy to find her bones. You didn't ask people with cushions of fat hiding their skeletons to be your patient. They'd stayed Christmas card friends, and Veronica sometimes looked her up when she came to Newcastle. Now she was greatly pleased to see her.

What are you doing here? they both asked, delicately, in case the reasons were bad. Helen's face went wan, and out flooded words.

It's my mother. She's broken her hip. But that's not the real problem. The trouble is, she doesn't remember anything. Not anything. Not even

that she's broken her hip. She keeps trying to get out of bed because she thinks she can walk. She doesn't remember that she falls over when she stands up. She forgets that she had a cup of tea a minute ago. I suppose she knows who I am, I'm not sure about that, but when I go out the door she doesn't remember I've been. I go to the nurses' station and back and she behaves as though she hasn't seen me for ten years.

Veronica felt a pang of gratitude for Alice's intact mind. Helen went on with her story, down the stairs, across the car park – she was giving Veronica a lift – in the car, over coffee at the Merewether house. Her mother had been living with her, until the broken hip, physically well enough but needing constant vigilance. Having no memory, said Helen, it's a living death. She isn't herself any more.

She'd been in the lavatory when it happened. Had forgotten her knickers were down around her ankles, had stood up and tipped over. Against the door, so they couldn't open it to get her out. Helen had huge dark circles under her eyes, where the skin had an opalescent bronze sheen. It would have been quite beautiful had people admired that kind of thing. Veronica thought of the days when her skinny bones had been in demand by radiography students. She'd be even more useful now.

I wish she'd die, said Helen. Not for me, I don't mean for me, I think I don't, I mean for her, she's not herself, what's the use of going on living when she's not herself. Hurting and miserable and not even remembering why or that this isn't how it always is.

Nobody tells you how to deal with these sorts of things, said Veronica. They tell you how to have babies and how to bring them up and what to do when problems come with school and teenagers and stuff, not always useful but at least it gives you something to go against, something to help you work out what might be right for you by rejecting, but your parents and getting old and death maybe ... you're on your own.

Yes, said Helen. I suppose nobody knows. Who knows about death? I don't. And I don't believe people who reckon they do.

Veronica sorted out photographs and took them into the hospital for Alice to identify. It was a kind of pastime, it hid the fact that there wasn't always a lot of conversation to make. But important too, if the pictures were to be a record. Alice's remembering was faultless and fast. Veronica wrote the names of people and the places, and if not the dates the periods of them on the backs. They laughed and talked about them, both ignoring the darker meaning, that this had to be done before it was too late, and the information died with its owner. *When a person*

dies a library dies; this is a black American saying that Mikelis read in the newspaper and liked to quote, but Veronica did not say it aloud at this moment.

There was an envelope of sepia snaps gone yellowish, and their bottoms were cut off. The figures were reduced to heads and shoulders; girls in lacy pin-tucked pale pretty dresses presumably and hats that dipped at the back and framed bright-eyed faces. They were Alice and Lily, Nell and Rose, with Vic and George. Some were just Alice and George, side by side, their heads at conscious angles. They were just as recognizably courting photographs as others are wedding photographs. The time was 1927, and some years later Alice had cut them off above the waist because she thought the dresses looked silly. Veronica had always scolded her for this, because in her eyes the fashions were beautiful, much more so than the dull clothes of the next decades. I suppose you're right, said Alice, peering at the fine needlework of the top halves, they are pretty, but just afterwards, you know, those shapeless dresses and the waists round the hips, they made you look like the side of a house, and we just thought, how could we have worn such things.

Oh mother. You thought you could change history, cut it away, expunge it from people's minds. But you can't, you know. Veronica produced another envelope: Alice had missed these, they hadn't been doctored. There they were, the no-waists in full glory, and droopy hems dipping down to little pale leather curvaceous shoes.

Louis heels. Alice smiled, pleased. See, how broad in the beam we looked, she said.

But gorgeous.

Sixty years. Silly things we were. If we'd known then ...

What a horror. It's just about the only good luck people have. That they don't know what's in store for them.

Do you think it was so bad? Alice spoke with a kind of mild curiosity, as though she were gossiping, which didn't deceive Veronica.

Oh, I don't mean it was bad. Not to live through. But if you saw all your life spread out ahead of you, well, you'd quail. Don't you think? It's dealing with one thing and then the next that makes you able to cope. And getting older, and ... not wiser, but more used to it.

Until there aren't any more things left to deal with. Or only one.

Veronica squeezes her mother's hand. She thinks she means death, dying. This is her chance to speak of these things, as received wisdom has it, to be open about this final fact of life, not leave her to face it alone. But she is scared, she doesn't know how, she hears clumsy words, dangerous, clanging in the air between them, she can't take the chance. Instead she dodges. Well, you're not there yet, she says. Still a

million things to do. She picks up the faded photographs of the long ago young people in their fancy clothes.

The background seemed to be a framework of skewed and rusty metal. Where are you, exactly, asked Veronica.

That's the *Adolphe*, said Alice. The wreck of the *Adolphe*. She was lost on the Oyster Bank, oh, before I was born. You could get to her from the Stockton Breakwater. It was something people did on Sunday afternoons. You took the ferry across and walked along the Breakwater to the *Adolphe*. She'd been a beautiful boat. French, George said, a windjammer, I think. But just a shell by then. Filled with concrete.

What a way to spend Sunday afternoon. Getting all dressed up to go and stroll on a wreck.

Taking the air.

Wasn't it rather melancholy?

I don't remember. It was what you did. I do recall George and Rose having a terrible argument, though. But they were always doing that.

After a fortnight Veronica had to go back to Canberra. Elinor drove up the day before, and Veronica handed over to her. She'd talked to the woman who specialized in geriatrics at the hospital, a tall severe clever person. She had a number of young doctors, registrars and students, working with her; they were warm and friendly to the patients and their relations. They touched the old people with gentle hands, rested their palms on their shoulders, even gave them hugs. It seemed a good thing that they found their charges lovable. There was quite a lot of scope for them to practise their speciality; Newcastle had an ageing population. Dr Pulowski was strict, she would not offer hope where it wasn't due. Alice was doing as well as could be expected; she is an old woman, said Dr Pulowski. Veronica reported all this to Elinor. Every day the families of patients try to catch the doctors and ask how things are going, there might be news, a change, an improvement of course is what they want, and they need to be sure that the doctors keep thinking of them.

When visiting hours were over the sisters went to the Italian restaurant in Islington. Over dinner they caught up on their own news. Elinor was trying to work out how to get back to France to write a book with a woman called Flora Hart whom she'd met when she was last there, a book about women's lives in the seventeenth century, from the lady of a castle down to the scullery maid. At home afterwards at the Merewether house she opened a bottle of wine, and they sat at the dining table. Veronica told the story of the woman with no memory. Even animals remember, she said. They remember what they need to know.

This night wasn't stormy, the sound of the sea was very quiet in the night air, with no wind racketing about. Just the endless muted breaking turning breaking of the waves. *The sea is calm tonight,* said Elinor. The women felt the house full of melancholy, they were aware of finitude. This house and the family life in it which had for so long been available for them whenever they wanted it was slipping away. Alice breathing lightly, in the high hospital bed made an adult cot by its raised chrome bars, Alice's thin breath was the fraying thread that held it.

This is an extract from a work in progress, called *The Tin Mission, A Hundred Year Novel.* The title refers to the old Missions to Seamen building of Newcastle port, which was washed out to sea in a storm, in 1912.

WHAT DO THESE WRITERS HAVE IN COMMON?

Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Thea Astley, E. Kamau Brathwaite, Erna Brodber, J.M. Coetzee, David Dabydeen, Nadine Gordimer, Wilson Harris, Marion Halligan, Jack Hodgins, Chris Koch, Bob Marley, Frank Moorhouse, Alice Munro, Les A. Murray, Caryl Phillips, Olive Senior, Wole Soyinka, Randolph Stow, Aritha van Herk, Derek Walcott, Rudy Wiebe.

KUNAPIPI!